

Dan McKanan

Anthroposophy and Environmentalism: Four Gifts

Dan McKanan is a professor at Harvard Divinity School who has been a student and friend of the Camphill movement since 1999. His new book, Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism, is forthcoming from the University of California Press in November 2017. It is a comprehensive study of the relationship between anthroposophy and the environmental movement, from Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course to the proliferation of community supported agriculture and green banking in the twenty-first century. In this essay, an abridged version of the book's final chapter, McKanan identifies four gifts that anthroposophy brings to the environmental movement as a whole. This book excerpt is reprinted from the Fall and Winter 2016/17 issue of Biodynamics.

Organisms evolve, ecosystems evolve, and social movements also evolve. The environmental movement of today is not the same as it was when Rudolf Steiner gave the Agriculture Course, when Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, or even when the first community-supported farms were launched. For nearly one hundred years, anthroposophy and its initiatives have shaped the evolution of environmentalism, and they will likely continue to do so in the century that lies ahead. In this chapter, I will not venture to make predictions about anthroposophy's effect on the environmentalism of the future, but I will express some hopes. These hopes reflect my own position as a sympathetic outsider to the anthroposophical movement. Over the past two decades, the alchemy of anthroposophy has rebalanced my sense of what it means to be an environmentalist, making me less dogmatically committed to a single activist path. I hope that in the future, other environmentalists will experience a similar rebalancing, reducing dogmatic and monocultural tendencies throughout the movement.

I see anthroposophy as the source of four significant gifts that have the potential to balance out one-sided tendencies that currently afflict environmentalism. These gifts are a *cosmic holism* that challenges us to attend to ever-widening circles of interconnection; a *homeopathic model of social change* that invites us to use subtle influences to heal the world; an *appropriate anthropocentrism* that allows us to experience ourselves as fully at home in the world; and a vision of *planetary transmutation* that can resist climate change while embracing both biological and spiritual evolution. By extending the environmental imagination, cosmic holism counters the tendency to reduce the environmental movement to a single issue—such as, in our present moment, climate change—and wards against excessive reliance on single activist strategies. In an age when environmental strategies are often judged exclusively on their capacity to scale up, homeopathy reminds us that small organisms are as important as large ones in a healthy ecosystem. Appropriate anthropocentrism protects us from the temptation to respond to ecological devastation with bitter misanthropy. And the

idea of planetary transmutation prevents the ideal of conserving nature and “leaving no trace” from hardening into a stubborn resistance to evolution itself. I would stress, however, that these gifts are valuable only as counterbalances: taken in isolation, each could be as distorted as that which it counters.

By “cosmic holism” I refer to all the spiritual dimensions of anthroposophy and of biodynamics that cannot be found in mainstream organics: the homeopathic preparations; the planting calendar; the alchemical vocabulary; the system of correspondences linking the organs of the plant to the organs of the human being; the notion that Christ’s blood still lives in the soil; the ideal of the farm as a living organism; and the conviction that the farmer’s spiritual striving influences on the health of the farm and the nutritional value of its produce. All of these reflect Rudolf Steiner’s conviction that “we must extend our view to the whole Cosmos.” Together, they constitute a standing challenge to environmentalists to stretch our imagination to include ever-widening webs of interconnection. One hundred years ago, cosmic holism created an imaginative space within which farmers could begin exploring the biological interconnections essential to the health of the soil; fifty years ago, it prodded gardeners to ask tough questions about DDT and other pesticides. More recently, cosmic holism has inspired fresh thinking about the economic, social, and cultural contexts for farming. What are the special contributions that persons with Down Syndrome, or with autism, can make to healthy farms? What forgotten ecological truths lie buried in Ptolemy’s system of planetary spheres, in Aristotle’s account of the four elements and four bodily humors, or in Paracelsus’s system of medicine? What new possibilities open up when a compost pile is also presented as a work of art?

The environmental movement today has the resources to embrace a cosmic holism that is even wider than that offered by Rudolf Steiner. Though his system was dizzying in scope, it was limited by his preference for European culture. Yet every culture has its own cosmological traditions, its own imaginative pictures linking the carrot or the earthworm to the music of the spheres. Today, students of anthroposophy increasingly do their ecological work in partnership with representatives of other spiritual traditions. The first university-based course in biodynamics in the United States is housed at Maharishi University of Management, which also teaches a “Vedic Organic Agriculture” based on the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Anthroposophical proponents of seed-saving and opponents of genetically modified organisms look for leadership to Vandana Shiva. Students of anthroposophy have joined with members of the Sufi Order International to revitalize the alchemical traditions of both the West and the Muslim world. Arthur Zajonc and Ha Vinh Tho bring decades of anthroposophical experience to their work with Buddhist organizations that spread spiritually grounded ideals of economic cooperation and ecological sustainability. All of this blending reflects a rising awareness that spirituality is, by its nature, hybrid. Just as the ancient Israelites borrowed their flood story from the Mesopotamians and the Romans

modeled their deities on those of the Greeks, so too are contemporary citizens of the United States indebted to the indigenous creation stories first told on the North American continent, to the Freemasonic ideals of our founding fathers, to the African rhythms embedded in our popular music, and to countless other spiritual streams. The cosmic holism of the future must simply become more conscious of its hybridity.

If the gift of cosmic holism is to widen the imagination of the environmental movement, anthroposophy's second gift invites environmentalists to narrow their vision through a greater appreciation of small and subtle forces. Along with the literal practice of homeopathy in the biodynamic preparations and in anthroposophical medicine comes what I would call a *homeopathic model of social change*—an awareness that practices that cannot or will not “scale up” can nevertheless exert subtle and powerful healing forces on society as a whole. This is a pattern that has recurred again and again in the history of anthroposophy. Marjorie Spock and Polly Richards did not aspire to build either a massive farm or a global movement against pesticides, but they did make the fruits of their own struggle available to Rachel Carson—and Carson shared those fruits with the whole world. Similarly, the founders of the Temple-Wilton Community Farm valued high ideals more than rapid growth, but they catalyzed a global CSA movement that continually mixes idealism and pragmatism in new proportions.

The power of homeopathy is best encapsulated in anthroposophy's willingness to play a “leavening” role in larger social processes. This thought can be traced back to Jesus' parables about yeast, mustard seeds, salt, and other small substances with big effects. Rudolf Steiner taught that “the great mission of Anthroposophy” was to become “a leaven in every part of life.” I heard this ideal expressed poignantly by a farmer who mused on the unrecorded fruits of his four decades of biodynamic research on various Camphill farms. If someone had been following “alongside who could have jotted it down and taken the correct pictures,” he speculated, that evidence might “have gone somewhere.” But from an anthroposophical perspective, he went on, it *had* gone somewhere anyhow. “Whatever we've done and offered up to the other side is available now in the akashic chronicle. . . . As long as the right things have been done at some point, they'll come down when the right time comes again.” I would add, more mundanely, that plants sprouted from the seeds he saved are still growing today.

That farmer's emphasis on the importance of individual spiritual activity touches on the third gift I see anthroposophy bringing to the ecology of environmentalism. In its *appropriate anthropocentrism*, anthroposophy holds out a compelling hope that humans can live entirely in harmony with the ecosystems that surround us. From the perspective of anthroposophical cosmology, human evolution began long before this particular planet materialized and will continue long after it ceases to exist. In a sense, the earth is simply the vessel for the current phase of the human story. But the consequence of this is not that the

earth is instrumentalized or made subordinate to humanity's spiritual ambition. Instead, the earth is identified so fully with humanity that human well-being cannot be imagined apart from the health of the planet.

Anthroposophy's emphasis on individual human development sets it apart from environmental spiritualities that stress "reverence for nature," understood as an intrinsic value just as it is and apart from human intervention. Camphiller Andrew Plant described this as the difference between the "Franciscan" and "Benedictine" streams within Christianity. "Saint Francis would have said, nature is beautiful, don't touch it. Let the birds come to you. . . . And the ecology movement is like that." Students of anthroposophy, by contrast, have more in common with the Benedictine monks who have always "worked the earth . . . tilled the soil, grown orchards and so on." This implies that humans are actually capable of "doing the good, not just wishing the good or not doing anything in case it is bad." Another practitioner of biodynamics explained his own faith in the human capacity for "doing the good" by unpacking the two parts of the word "biodynamics." "Bio" implies "respect to nature." But "dynamic means this is not enough. We need to go further and to bring something back out of our cultural sphere as humans to nature." Ultimately, biodynamics involves a "double gesture" that seeks "to protect the wisdom of nature" but also to bring nature "nearer . . . to what we are in the better sense of ourselves, in the sense of being spiritual beings."

For most students of anthroposophy, the bottom line is that humans simply cannot be separated from nature, just as matter cannot be separated from spirit. Humans can and should change nature, but only if we are willing to change along with it, and only if the process of change is spiritual as well as physical. This commitment leads to anthroposophy's fourth and final gift to the environmental movement: by placing its ecological commitments within a cosmic context of evolutionary development and planetary transmutation, it offers a challenging alternative to such traditional environmental values as "preservation," "sustainability," and even "resilience." For students of anthroposophy, evolutionary change is ongoing and inevitable, and the earth will eventually experience "climate change" on a scale far more dramatic than what is currently projected to result from increasing levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide. But this expectation does not lead them to be passive about carbon related climate change. Instead, they are hard at work to ensure that the mechanistic, one-dimensional changes brought about by the concentration of carbon do not foreclose the possibilities of more authentically ecological processes of change.

Planetary transmutation dovetails with some of the most interesting developments in the environmental movement today. Environmental historians have shown that anthropogenic climate change is not entirely new in the twentieth century: at least since the beginning of agriculture, humans have turned forests into pastures, eliminated certain species, and enabled the spread of other species in the wake of human migration. These historians have also shown that the preservationist ethos, with its celebration of "wild" or

"virgin" nature, has often been tied up with imperial violence against indigenous communities such as the original inhabitants of America's natural parks. Another point of contact is with the segment of the climate justice movement that accepts the inevitability of some degree of climate change, and thus argues that "adaptation" and "mitigation" strategies must be developed alongside efforts to minimize the damage.

For anthroposophy, the biodynamic farm is the ideal site for planetary transmutation. And this farm-centered vision of earth evolution has much to offer every environmentalist. The simple truth is that the earth of 2100 will be vastly different than the earth of 1900. It will be a hotter planet, though we do not know how much hotter. It will be home to fewer species of plants and animals. We cannot change these facts. What we can influence are the evolutionary forces that will be changing the earth between now and 2100, and beyond. Do we want these forces to be primarily mechanical forces, such as the injection of carbon into the ocean floor and the spraying of reflective gases into the atmosphere as part of a high tech strategy to mitigate climate change? Do we want the range of species to be limited even further, as genetic engineers seek monocultures that will maximize food production for humans on an ecologically disrupted planet? Or do we want the century ahead to be characterized by a deeper symbiotic partnership between humanity and both wild and domestic plants and animals, as we work together to restore ecological balance and gradually recreate biodiversity? If these are the things we want, we would do well to look to the biodynamic farm as an emblem of our future. It is here that farmers look closely at their cows and their corn, helping them to *be* cows and corn more authentically. It is here that wild plants and animals are welcomed as bearers of their own distinct gifts. It is here that communities gather to learn, to celebrate festivals, and to share earth's bounty. And it is here that people are coming to *know* that our future and the future of the planet are inseparably knit together.